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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a literacy-based thematic unit on forestry and conservation designed for field experiences in early childhood education. This unit responds to national and state initiatives and serves as a model for enacting reform of science instruction by equipping preservice teachers with the necessary strategies to foster science process skills, promote scientific literacy, and make science meaningful, personal, and relevant to the student. The unit demonstrates for preservice early childhood teachers how to plan, implement, and assess integrated thematic instructional units in a field-based internship with kindergarten classes. Throughout the unit, a variety of strategies promote literacy in cross-curricular contexts--strategies such as creative dramatics, webbing, poetry writing, journalizing, and recording data on charts and graphs. (Contains eight references.) (CR)

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# Look at Me!! I'm A Tree!: A Literacy-based Integrated Thematic Unit on Forestry and Conservation Designed for Field Experiences in Early Childhood Education

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Look at Me!! I'm A Tree!: A Literacy-based Integrated Thematic Unit on Forestry and Conservation Designed for Field Experiences in Early Childhood Education

Karen E. Mayo

## Background

During the last quarter of a century, national standardized test scores among high school students have fallen sharply in mathematics and science. Likewise, the number of students choosing careers in engineering, science, and mathematics has decreased steadily. Widescale investigations of science classes reveal that nearly a third of the nation's teachers lack adequate training in science and science education (Fort, 1993). It comes as no surprise that students complain of being bored and uninterested in science (Goodlad, 1984; JBeily, 1994).

These findings have caused an outbreak of several federally-funded agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Education, the Association for the Advancement of Science, and the National Science Foundation to unite efforts and wage war on scientific illiteracy in this country (Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology, and Government, 1991). With the Congressional mandate of **GOALS 2,000**, the federally-funded **Project 2061: Benchmarks for Scientific Literacy**, and the publication of the 1996 National Standards for Science, our nation's schools have their work cut out for them in reforming the nature of science instruction into meaningful, stimulating hands-on experiences (Disinger, 1990; Haury, 1993; Mayer, 1993).

## Rationale

One suggested method of effecting systemic reform in science instruction may occur at the preservice level. It is hypothesized that through exemplary teacher education programs, preservice educators can be successfully trained in effective strategies for teaching science. This unit responds to national and state initiatives and serves as a model for enacting reform of science instruction by equipping preservice teachers with the necessary strategies to foster science process skills, promote scientific literacy and make science meaningful, personal, and relevant to the student (JBeily, 1994).

## Description

"Look at Me!! I'm a Tree!" demonstrates for preservice early childhood teachers how to plan, implement, and assess integrated thematic instructional units in a field-based internship with kindergarten classes. During the first twelve weeks of the semester, the university students participate in hands-on demonstrations of each week's lesson during their regular university "lecture". The preservice early childhood teachers then deliver the instruction weekly in a small group setting with two or three kindergarten children. The university professor supervises the site-based instruction by monitoring and rotating in and out of the two early childhood classrooms.

University students maintain a course portfolio which contains their lesson plans for each week, anecdotal records of the students' responses to the activities, and the preservice teachers' reflections.

The kindergarten students' work is compiled and bound into individual book form at the end of the semester.

## Content

The thematic unit, "Look at Me! I'm a Tree!!" is designed to promote the acquisition of scientific concepts related to forestry and conservation. The unit begins with the university students offering a retelling of Shel Silverstein's book, The Giving Tree. The kindergarten students are engaged in listening and responding to this story. Also, on the first day, the students adopt-a-tree to observe and monitor during the semester.

Throughout the unit, a variety of strategies promote literacy in cross-curricular contexts. Some of these, for example, are creative dramatics, webbing, mnenomic strategies to promote vocabulary and oral language development, poetry writing, journalizing, and recording and interpreting data on charts and graphs. These activities foster emergent literacy through scientific investigation. The unit is culminated with a tree-planting ceremony on the school campus.

## Conclusion

Through this internship experience, preservice early childhood teachers gain insight into the nature of integrated thematic instruction and its significance in teaching young learners. The interns learn how to take young students outdoors safely for hands-on science instruction. They discover ways to promote concept attainment and foster emergent scientific literacy. The preservice teachers also gain confidence and expertise in teaching science as inquiry. Above

all, they become aware of the necessity of introducing and reinforcing scientific concepts through relevant and meaningful experiences.

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